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BALKAN CRISIS: Elections May Help Serbian President

Supporters of Serbian President Milosevic reportedly will try again to bring down federal Prime Minister Panic's government in a confidence vote today. Elections next month may strengthen Milosevic's position over his federal rivals.

Serbian hardliners reportedly have enough votes in the Federal Assembly's lower house to remove Panic, but Montenegrin delegates in the upper house who support the Prime Minister could block his removal. Meanwhile, federal President Cosic has set federal elections for 20 December in hopes of getting international sanctions removed and taking advantage of Milosevic's declining popularity; Serbian leaders reportedly will hold republic elections the same day.

Recent polls indicate that the two federal leaders have more support in Serbia than Milosevic, but the democratic opposition is still unprepared to challenge Milosevic and his Socialist Party seriously; opposition leaders reportedly are considering boycotting the elections. Moreover, Panic has indicated he may not run, even though he hopes to remain prime minister.

Comment: The Serbian President's party probably will remain the strongest in the Assembly, and no democratic opposition leader has announced a willingness to challenge him for the presidency. In addition, Milosevic's apparent decision to hold elections in the midst of the current crisis probably will bolster his legitimacy and might provide a pretext for some countries to propose easing sanctions.

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